

Why Turkey belongs to the EU

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With its geographical location, at the crossroads of an East-West and North-South axis, Turkey has played a dominating geopolitical role from the days of the Ottoman Empire to the present. In recognition of Turkey's strategic position, President Harry S. Truman was quick to incorporate Turkey into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). As the alliance is celebrating its 60th anniversary, Turkey is again at a crossroad. This time, the choice facing the Turkish Republic is whether Ankara should continue its path towards becoming a full fledged member of the European Union, or if Turkey should adopt a "neo Ottoman" foreign policy brokering conflicts between Israel and Syria and between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Beyond its broad foreign policy implications, Turkey is also facing a significant internal identity crisis where traditional urban pro-Western elite are being challenged by a new and emerging conservative bourgeoisie originating from the Anatolian heartland. At the center of this power struggle, is the current ruling Islamic Development Party (AKP) led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan vis-à-vis the Turkish military establishment.

Turkey's powerful generals have long seen themselves as the "guardians" of secularism as they adhere to the principals of "Kemalism," laid out by the Republic's founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938). "Ataturk," or "father Turk," as his people called him, emerged on the political stage during the vanishing days of the Ottoman Empire. During these turbulent times, as pockets of Turkish populated settlements were threatened by increasing nationalism in the various regions of the empire, the young and ambitious army officer, Mustafa Kemal, was to become one of the most notable military leaders and statesmen of his generation.

Transition from Empire to Republic

From a small principality on the frontiers of the Islamic world at the turn of the 14th century, the Ottoman Empire became the most powerful state in the Islamic world stretching from central Europe to the Indian Ocean under the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566). Following the long wars of the 17th century, the Ottoman Empire declined as a world power in favor of the European mercantile powers. By the mid 18th century, what was left of the once mighty empire became known as the "sick man of Europe." Despite countless reforms of the civil and bureaucratic structure, Ottoman political life continued under European tutelage.

Recognizing Turkey's state of decay, Ataturk envisioned a strong, independent, and secular republic. According to noted Ataturk biographer, Lord Kinross: "Ataturk differed from the dictators of his age in two significant respects: his foreign policy was not based on expansion but on retraction of frontiers; his home policy on the foundation of a political system that could survive his own time." Some of the republic's early reforms were instituting a constitutional parliamentary system in 1923, followed by the introduction of the Swiss Civil Code in 1926. From a legal perspective, the Swiss Civil Code replacing traditional Sharia laws was an important step in the direction of westernization of personal, family, and inheritance laws. Other significant changes promoted by the Kemalists were adopting the Latin alphabet, western numerals, weights and measures, and gender equality.

Military and Democracy

The political system during the early Kemalist era remained a one party state, where no legal opposition was active until after World War II. Turkey has since come a long way in its democratization effort, despite brief military interventions in 1960, 1971, and 1980. Each time, the generals provided important exit guarantees that enhanced the military's position, yet civilian control of the Republic has prevailed, as Turkey has become a competitive multiparty system.

With the reelection of the AKP in 2007, Prime Minister Erdogan has secured his base as he openly challenges Turkey's ancient regime, on a verity of issues from the headscarf ban to, as the only NATO ally, inviting Iran's controversial President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Istanbul. The notion that "Turkey has to follow an integrated foreign policy and cannot have priority with the EU at the expense of its relations with the Middle East—as advocated by senior AKP officials—is a clear break with Kemalist foreign policy. Yet at this critical juncture, it is important for Europe to fully embrace Turkey. Because of its strategic location and economic ties to continental Europe, the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Mediterranean, and the Black Sea region, Turkey can fully complement the EU on a variety of issues from trade to security. In particular, Turkey can provide the European markets access to rich energy resources from the Middle East and Eurasia.

The battle for Eurasia

On the other hand, the Turkish government has shown increasing frustration, not only with U.S. policies towards the Middle East but also with the EU's refusal to seriously consider its bid. Should Europe fail to embrace Turkey, this could be a fatal push of Turkey into the Russian orbit. Despite historical mistrust, Turkish-Russian economic ties have greatly expanded over the past decade, reaching \$32 billion in 2008, making Russia Turkey's largest trading partner. By taking advantage of cooling relations between Ankara and Washington, Moscow is determined to expand its sphere of influence over the black sea region and Eurasia. Through an aggressive trade and investment policy, Russia skillfully outmaneuvered the United States by closing its airbase in Manas, Kyrgyzstan.

In the great powers struggle for influence, Turkey is an indispensable piece, too precious for the West to lose. Instead of remaining a "Christian Club," the European Union should overcome its historical fear of "the Turks" and recognize that as a NATO member, Turkey will prioritize its ties with the United States and the West; as an EU member, Turkey will continue to cherish democracy, liberalism, and secularism. Europe turning its back on Turkey could be the nail in the coffin for an occidental oriented foreign policy and a secular national identity.

Sources

Source: The Diplomatic Courier (USA), 25-03-2009